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NEA FOR FO AND NEA/RA; NSC FOR PASCUAL

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAL LE SY IZ EG

SUBJECT: ARAB LEAGUE SYG MOUSSA DISCUSSES REGIONAL ISSUES
WITH PDAS FELTMAN

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey

Reason: 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Arab League Secretary General Moussa discussed Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the global financial crisis during an October 26 meeting with visiting NEA PDAS Feltman and the Ambassador.

Moussa said that the situation in Lebanon has improved markedly over the past six months, but still needs attention.

He characterized Syrian behavior with respect to Lebanon as "satisfactory enough." Moussa acknowledged progress in Iraq, but worried that sectarian tensions could re-ignite, especially if the status of forces (SOFA) negotiations falter. He reiterated long-standing Arab League complaints on Israeli settlement activity, and urged that the Arab world be included in international fora to address the global financial crisis. End summary.

¶2. (C) PDAS Feltman asked Moussa for an assessment on Lebanon, noting that we are watching the situation in the north as well as the recent resignation of Deputy Foreign Minister Abu Jamra with some concern. Moussa said that "we've succeeded in getting Lebanon right," through a chain of positive steps beginning with the Doha talks. The current trend is toward reconciliation, he said. Moussa characterized Abu Jamra's resignation as "trivial" and understood that Abu Jamra had attended a recent cabinet meeting, resignation notwithstanding. He recognized that there will still be some problems, and that "regional influences" need to be monitored, as well as any indication that Lebanese political conciliation may falter. Although the mood is good, full "conciliation" has yet to be achieved, especially in the Christian community. He said that he appreciated President Sleiman but doesn't envy him. Political players such as Michel Aoun are competing for power.

¶3. (C) Moussa believed that Syrian performance with respect to Lebanon was "sufficient enough." He opined that Damascus is waiting for the next American administration before taking any additional steps on Lebanon or on regional policy; he admitted that European outreach to Damascus has not moved the Syrians as far as he would have hoped. Moussa said he believes that Syria realizes it will not return to Lebanon militarily, but instead will re-calibrate to maintain influence, such as through the opening of a new embassy. He argued that the delineation of the Syria/Lebanon border would need to include Shebaa Farms. PDAS Feltman said that our regional priorities, including on Syria/Lebanon, were not likely to change with a new administration. Moussa said that the USG needs to focus on the "main problems" as opposed to "derivatives," e.g. focus on Shebaa Farms as opposed to disarming Hizballah, an approach that would "remove the pretext" that Hizballah uses regarding its arms. He argued that the Israel-Lebanon border is not only an issue for Lebanon but for the Arab League. PDAS Feltman said he expects the border issue would eventually come up in the Turkish-sponsored Israel-Syria indirect talks. Moussa was

pessimistic; he assessed that both the Israelis and Syrians benefit from the process of these talks, but neither will press for substantive progress absent a USG role.

¶14. (C) Moussa argued that Israeli settlement activity needs to be confronted by the USG in order for meaningful progress on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. He agreed that it is important to record progress made in the negotiations in order to maintain the process and ensure the new American administration can engage quickly. But, he argued that more than "de minimis steps" were needed. Moussa was downcast on prospects for intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

¶15. (C) Moussa assessed that Iraq remained fragile. Sectarian conciliation has not gone as far as it needs to, he said. The Sunnis, Shia and Kurds need to get used to working together; he worried that recent reports of killings of Iraqi Christians was a "bad signal." He said that Iraq's army, police and judiciary still needed a lot of work. How can they protect Iraq against the "strong hands at play" such as Iran?

¶16. (C) Moussa said that the Arab League would not be able to support any status of forces agreement (SOFA) without seeing the text first. He said that Iraqi FM Zebari has sent him an early draft, but he understood that it had changed significantly. PDAS Feltman said that the current document would put the Iraqis in control of their country. Moussa asked if the current United Nations mandate (U.N. Security Council Resolution 1723) could be extended; PDAS Feltman said it would be difficult, and that we should focus instead on signing a SOFA agreement that would put the Iraqis in control

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of their country.

¶17. (C) PDAS Feltman asked Moussa for advice on dealing with Iran's regional momentum. Moussa said that the "double standard" with respect to Iran and Israel's nuclear programs made it very difficult for the Arab League to be supportive. Some Arabs believe that Iran's nuclear program serves as a "balance." The Ambassador urged Moussa to focus on the reality Iran's program poses to the region. PDAS Feltman said that the IAEA has been clear. Moussa said that the Arab League goal is for a "zone free of nuclear weapons" in the Middle East and that we should adopt this position and begin talks with both Israel and Iran. Arab League Chief of Staff Hisham Yousef said that if the USG "identified the principle" (a nuclear free zone) it would be helpful.

SCOBAY